Implementing an electronic system to screen and actively refer to community based agencies for food insecurity in primary care
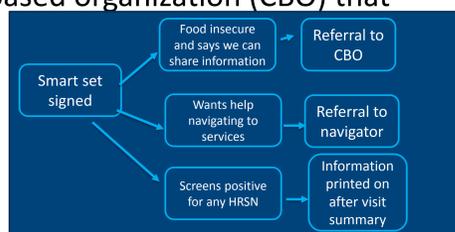
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Introduction

- Health related social needs (HRSN) such as food insecurity are prevalent in safety net healthcare settings

- Yet these settings lack feasible systematic ways to actively refer patients to community based agencies (e.g. refer to agencies that will reach out to patients).

Methods

- We implemented a systematic screening program for food insecurity, integrated into the electronic health record, that enables electronic active referral to a community based agency.

- Patients complete paper forms which are entered into the electronic record by clinic staff.

- If patients agree that we can share their contact information with a community based agency, our system automatically faxes a referral to a community based organization (CBO) that addresses food insecurity.

- We initially piloted on paper, then integrated into the electronic medical record and rolled it out to 16 primary care clinics of an integrated safety net health care system.
  - Team based approach
  - Currently rolling out electronic tablet

Team-based workflow for social determinants
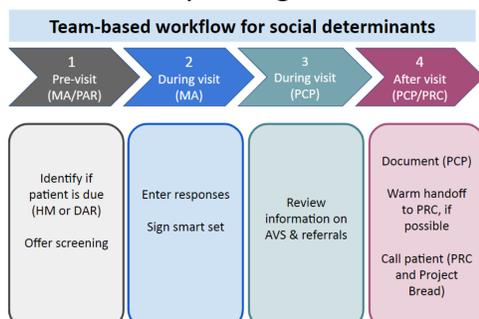
*MA=Medical assistant, PAR= Patient access representative, PCP= primary care provider, PRC= patient resource coordinator; for tablet workflow, MA does not need to enter responses

Summary

- **Screening for and addressing food insecurity is critical to health**
- **Screening for food insecurity and active referral to community based organizations (CBO) is feasible and acceptable to primary care staff**
- **Our system has resulted in over 11,000 screenings, 2,000 referrals to a CBO and over 500 food stamp screenings**

Measures of Success

- \# individuals screened for food insecurity and referred to a community based agency

- % of patients reached by community based agency

- \# supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP) screenings and community resource referrals provided(e.g., information provided on resource)

- Provider and staff feedback on burden and feasibility

Results to Date

- To date, we have screened over 11,000 patients for food insecurity (89% of whom were insured by Medicaid), of whom 27% screened positive for food insecurity (range of 16-42% across clinics)

- Our program has resulted in 2,314 referrals to a CBO
  - 1,418 (61%) were successfully reached by the CBO and offered SNAP screening
  - 632 (44%) were not already enrolled in SNAP, of whom 407 (64%) accepted screening.
  - 634 (45%) were already enrolled in SNAP, of whom 152 (24%) accepted screening to increase benefits.
  - CBO provided information to patients on 2,820 resources (average of 2 per person reached) for health related social needs such as food pantries and meal program and department of transitional assistance.

Number of screenings conducted before and after electronic health record (EMR) integration

- Feedback from providers and staff indicate the program is well received and feasible in a busy primary care setting. (N=55 respondents to an anonymous survey)
  - 73% believed this program improves health
  - 92% were satisfied or neutral about the program
  - 75% reported entering the data was either quick or not too cumbersome
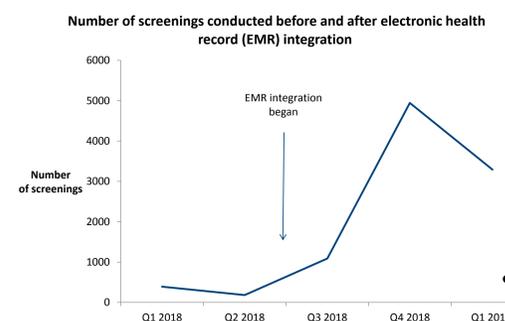
Discussion

- A program integrated into the electronic medical record that systematically screens for food insecurity and actively refers patients to a community based agency program is feasible in a safety net setting.

- Such programs can actively connect patients with community based agencies that address health related social needs.

- This innovation demonstrates that a screening and active referral system for community resources can be integrated into the electronic medical record in safety net healthcare settings.

- As safety net institutions increasingly address health related social needs, programs like this one can actively connect patients to resources that reach out to patients, thereby reducing the burden on patients to seek out community based agencies.

Future Opportunities

- Develop opportunities to close the loop on active referrals (e.g., confirm when patients connect with community based agencies)
  - Define and navigate high risk patients to agencies

- Develop workflows and systems for screening and referring patients outside of visits (e.g. through patient portal or telephone)

- Sustain continuous quality improvement framework